

## **Chapter 2: The All-Knower of What is in the Breasts**

The ten years since then were spent securing that Promise, cultivating the appearance of the pious son, if nothing more. Yet my nights remained contaminated by sinful dreams, struggling to force their way out.

They were dreams about a timid maiden and her beloved lady. It started out as lovey-dovey fantasies, but those dreams slowly gave way to pessimistic nightmares about insecurity, fear, codependence, and the realization that love is an addiction just as dangerous as the worst narcotics. This caused my dreams to adapt, imagining increasingly complex lives for the timid maiden and her lady. This fantasy became so vivid and complex that it felt more real than life itself. In those dreams, they were lost sheep familiar with heartbreak and loss, so when they realized how compatible they were, they became platonic friends. When they depended on one another for support, they became close platonic friends. When they helped one another conquer their demons and grow, they became platonic friends that others should aspire towards. When they became ride or die, promising to always support one another until the end, they became the platonic ideal of the concept of friendship. Even when they existentially feared the day when one must bury the other, they remained within the platonic ideal of the concept of friendship. This relationship was reliable and did not introduce much risk.

But the timid maiden yearned for something more. She imagined her lady one day inviting her over. By then her lady would have married a rich prince who provided her with

everything she needed to pursue her dreams of happiness, activism, community, and justice. But on this day, her husband would be off on a manly camping adventure, giving the two of them some time alone. The maiden would cook her father's pasta recipe in her lady's luxurious marble kitchen, and they would enjoy it together in the massive garden of the lady's Victorian mansion, whose spires, battlements, and machicolations created the impression of a castle. From this garden grew beautiful flowers of diverse colours. On the garden's edge they could peer into a vast ravine below, where people biked and held picnics enjoying the majesty of God's creation while the light of the sun shone overhead. As the two of them sat in the grass, their hands interlocked, the maiden would gaze into her beloved lady's eyes—thoughtful green emeralds set in a face of statuesque beauty—and her lady would return it. The maiden's eyes, barred by round, rimless glasses, would then know what it was like to be gazed at with a love she could trust.

“You never listen to me,” she heard someone say, though she did not know where they were. She tried her best to ignore them.

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The meaning behind this dream was obvious. My subconscious was trying to imagine a life in which I was loved for who I was by someone I could trust in a safe place.

Those dreams once convinced me to carve out a space where she could live a carnal approximation of a better life. She exercised to make our body more closely resemble what she wanted. She shaved our body hair and took care of the skin it uncovered. This was not very risky so long as we always wore long-sleeved shirts and pants which hid our limbs. She also engaged in ... licentious activities, which increased our energy and interest in living. So long as we ignored the face we saw in the mirror (which can be a bit difficult since phones act like mirrors

in natural light) and the beard touching the pillow we slept on, there was a sort of balance. I understood this arrangement as a containment zone. In a nuclear disaster, radioactive material may be contained with a thousand tons of concrete and an exclusion zone bordered by a quarantine regime preventing the spread of radioactive materials. Likewise, her life was contained within a bedroom and a washroom with a regime to separate her life from mine, ensuring that my life was the only one that ever interfaced with other human beings.

But lived secrets create evidence. What would you do if there was a magic wand that you needed for your survival but that could also kill your entire family if someone saw it? That kind of existential paranoia led me to carry a sheathed knife in a pocket day and night (I think it is illegal to carry knives in public in this country) while quadruple checking the quarantine on her life. I did not trust the lock for our room. I made sure our room was set up in a way that filled up an entire wall with the bed and furniture, leaving only two to three feet of space for the door to open. This was wide enough to open the door but also narrow enough to block the door with a chair. The rest of the furniture behind the chair made it physically impossible to open the door without tearing it down with an axe. In the nuclear disaster analogy, this would be like a situation where a lesser bureaucrat caused a nuclear disaster and then contained it while covering it up. The threat of torture and execution if their superiors found out would naturally lead such a person to sleep with a gun under the pillow.

The university's student crisis team suggested moving out and working. That would give her enough security to live out her life without a lot of fear. But the stress of housing and work on top of studying and depression would kill me, so that was off the table. I suspected that my place in this economy made it impossible to move out. Gregor Craigie's 2024 book, *Our Crumbling Foundation Canadian Edition: How We Solve Canada's Housing Crisis*, cites

damning figures stating that housing prices have grown four times faster than income, that rents for new listings have grown twice as much as average income,<sup>1</sup> that average ownership costs have taken up 62.7 percent of average income (85.2 percent in Toronto and 95.8 percent in Vancouver),<sup>2</sup> and that the average price for a home has gone up 180 percent compared to 38 percent for average income.<sup>3</sup> I am sure these statistics are not surprising for people in North America, though I am not sure if others feel a sense of overwhelming existential dread when comprehending what these statistics mean for my future.

Craigie provides an account from a nurse named Nicola. Nicola got an apartment in Mississauga for \$2,200 a month. It did not have an in-suite laundry, the fire alarms went off three times a month, and she constantly found mice.<sup>4</sup> When her family tried to move, rentals ended up in bidding wars of up to \$3,500.<sup>5</sup> For essential workers earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000 a year (too much for social housing, too little to live), this pushes them to leave Toronto or switch professions, which makes it difficult to make friends because of the likelihood that they would be forced to move away, resulting in isolation.<sup>6</sup>

Keeping her life quarantined also resulted in my own isolation, but I must be grateful for everything I had. The job I got at a golf club at least gave me a distraction that could pay off my debts. It took me an entire year to get a job after I graduated from university. Finding employment seemed like finding a school clique all over again, and since I never understood cliques, my attempts at job hunting went nowhere. I could not be myself because nobody would want what I truly was, yet my attempts at pretending to be what others wanted failed since I could not convincingly falsify confidence. How does someone suppressing their *nafs* and paying off their debts answer questions like “Why should we hire you,” “What are your strengths,” and “What are your goals?” Some part of me always knew that I had no value or future, and they

must have known regardless of what I said. So, when the golf club hired me, I was more than grateful that I got a job at all that I did not bother with the jobs political science students typically look for after they graduate.

“Just do what everyone says,” I told myself back then. Water the grass, mow it, rake it, and clean it of trash. Scrub the bathrooms and make sure every inch is spotless. Put all your effort into being dependable. When a customer demands something, get it done. When a superior demands something, get it done. Profusely apologize when you inevitably mess it all up. Do not speak unless spoken to so nobody knows the real you. Always keep things professional. It was mental cryostasis. A thousand days could go by in the blink of an eye without a single lasting memory, as if those days never existed at all.

Back then I thought this was sustainable. Endure the commute, endure the micromanagement, endure the disappointment, endure the seasonal layoff, endure the aimlessness, endure the nagging self-hatred and constant comparisons to those surpassing me, and in those hours alone, let her live out her dreams of a different life. Living like this used up too much energy to make friends or socialize with anyone (I was never competent at socializing either), but if I could just maintain the bare minimum needed to let her live out her dreams on the days we were not burned out, that was enough. This way of doing things prevented me from forcing so much suffering upon Him just to be rewarded with homelessness or housing limbo on top of even less secure employment. So long as the status quo remained, I could be grateful that my life was better than most. Then the world changed, and I crumbled.

Maybe I was yelled at one too many times. Maybe political turmoil on the news chipped away at my mind. Maybe life in general chipped away at my mind. Maybe a customer or manager reminded me of another thing I hated about myself. Maybe he got too angry at a piece

of technology that outpaced his sensibilities. Maybe I woke up on the wrong side of the bed. It did not matter. The only thing that mattered was that one day, the crushing weight of all the lies, self-hatred, and paranoia was too much. I was constantly wondering what would happen if He had an inkling about her life, constantly fearing an oversight that would end our lives, constantly aware that if anyone else was in my shoes, they would have made Him proud. But it was only then that I truly felt like I was playing Russian roulette with our lives. On that day, I remembered that Promise. To keep secrets, one must believe that secrets do not exist.

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And so, her life was cordoned off to vapid carnal fantasies where there was no physical evidence that a maiden existed within me. But these evolving dreams tried to change my views on the matter.

“I have nothing to offer,” the maiden told herself in the newer dreams. “My nose is wide, my face is ugly, my body is unseemly, my mind is lewd and depraved.” Each thought was more condemning than the last. In her nightmares, she was a dirty, hairy, hideous monster who defiled her lady. To keep her lady from learning who she truly was, the maiden always wore a mask separating her from everyone else, which caused her years to evaporate as the separation between her and her masks disappeared.

In one series of dreams, they shared a flat in a concrete building made affordable thanks to a key worker housing program. It gave them a safe, close-knit community of nurses, firefighters, teachers, and paramedics who knew how tough this world could be without judgement on top of it.<sup>7</sup> At first, they treated it as a place to sleep, but over time they decorated it with everything that made them happy once they no longer feared judgement. Posters and merchandise of their favorite celebrities and stories. Photographs and artwork that inspire them

alongside their own art expressing themselves. Decorative lights to create a soft, cozy glow inside. Shelves containing their favorite books and novels and comics. Stuffed animals to remind them of happy times and tell them that they are safe.

From the porch of this flat, they beheld a clear view of the moon alongside a multitude of stars and constellations. This led the two of them to move a couch onto the porch, straining every step of the way. But once they were finished, it gave them a site to drink liquid courage while gazing out at the majesty of God's creation. At first this was just for recreation, but it later provided a space where they could slowly rekindle the embers they once believed died out long ago.

In one such dream, the lady asked how they regarded one another.

"Your beautiful face is the fuel that keeps me going," the maiden answered. "So long as I have my coffee," she added while pinching her friend's cheeks. Most days the lady would take this as an invitation to return her non-committal sass with even more non-committal sass, but on one such day, she was too tired to keep up her defenses.

"You think I'm beautiful?" her lady asked soberly.

"You're going to give me a heart attack," the maiden heard someone say, though she did not know where they were. They were far away, probably several blocks away, so she ignored them.

"Of course. Everything about you is beautiful. Your eyes, your smile, your noggin. Your character." Her lady remained stoic, but a redness spread across her cheeks.

"You don't have to kiss my ass so much."

"I assure you I most certainly am not," the maiden replied. "Though I will oblige if you ask." Her lady raised an eyebrow, which prompted the maiden to playfully slink across the

couch. The maiden could feel her heartbeat racing but was confident she had the willpower to endure more playful teasing.

“Who wouldn’t,” the maiden whispered as she slinked closer. “You are so dependable, so graceful, so compassionate. A person who always holds themselves to high standards. Everyone would die to be with someone like you.” She saw her lady’s redness spread to her ears.

“But I can see how hard it is for you,” the maiden continued next to her lady’s ear, one finger brushing against her lady’s lips. “To let others rely on you without relying on them. To make others happy without others to make you happy. There is nothing that would make me happier than to be that special person for you. That special person who could lift the burdens holding you down.” She felt her lady’s warm breath as her redness spread to her neck and sternum.

“You would do anything to make me happy?” her lady asked.

“Anything,” the maiden answered. The maiden could feel heat in her cheeks too, but she knew her lady was too chaste and wholesome to go all the way.

“Kiss me,” the lady requested breathlessly.

“Eh?”

The maiden realized then that their lips were centimeter apart, and that the glossy eyes which gazed at her also stared at her nose, her face, her body, and the wretched soul underneath. Suddenly an overwhelming heat burned everything between her scalp and stomach, like entering an oven. This heat testified against her, reminded her of where she really belonged.

She pecked her lady’s lips before slinking back, her racing heartbeat as fast as a rabbit’s.

“Wasting my time talking to an idiot,” she heard someone say. It was just as distant as before, but in this situation, that voice was overwhelming, condemning her for playing with her



lady's feelings.

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One longs for the day when the only barrier to intimacy was low self-esteem. But a lot of it lies in economic history. The key is the perception of homes and the land they are built on. They transitioned from a basic public good managed with supply-side policies to a financial instrument managed with demand-side policies.<sup>8</sup>

Until the mid-1980s, the housing supply was managed with social housing policy, assisted homeownership programs, subsidies to private rental development, subsidies to private-rental tenants, and public land development.<sup>9</sup> This directed development towards the creation of affordable housing for various income groups.<sup>10</sup> From 1986 to 1993, the scope of social housing was narrowed alongside a shift towards a market-oriented system. Social housing was now meant for market imperfections: people with special needs, people with disabilities, and the homeless. Low-income populations were directed to rental assistance while mortgage access was expanded to support demand. 1993 furthered this trend, ending federal social housing to make it a provincial issue and directing subsidies from supply-side development to demand-side rental assistance.<sup>11</sup>

A paradigm shift occurred in 1999. The *CMHC* (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) mandate of supporting social housing supply was abandoned to instead function like a competitive private mortgage insurance company. The *CMHC* loosened insurance requirements to channel household savings towards the housing market, boosting demand and attracting capital.<sup>12</sup> With easier access to credit, more Canadians obtained homeownership by taking out larger mortgages even as prices outpaced income, causing debts to explode. Now housing was a commodity, and measures since 2010 to manage mortgage lending remained tied

to the idea that housing was primarily a financial instrument.<sup>13</sup>

The specifics on how housing prices are influenced by capital flowing into the market from private equity firms<sup>14</sup> and mortgage-backed financial security markets<sup>15</sup> is a lot more complicated.<sup>16</sup> It is pointless to figure out the specifics. Like the inertia on a freight train, this neoliberal way of perceiving land is going to last for a long time no matter what I learned about this abyss. So, I made the Faustian bargain. I do not have to worry about being economically ground to dust and devoured by the streets, and in return I endure His terms of life unto death. If I was already barely capable of making money while living with Him and broadly conforming to an appearance that people could hire, what would it be like if I moved out and let her take the reigns? Nobody would even notice our corpse, that was how obvious the choice seemed to me.

At the very least I had the option to live with Him. People in this country's culture are often kicked out the moment they turn eighteen, reassured that the world is their oyster while reminded that the weaker among them will become food for the stronger. The bonds of blood were economically secure. Sure, the three of us were a dysfunctional "family" if you could even call it one, living far away from anybody on either side of the family, but that only gave me more reasons to not rock this precarious boat.

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In that way people are not so different on the macroscopic scale or the microscopic scale. Continuity is preferable to discontinuity. Even in a dysfunctional system, the risk and uncertainty of going off script was too much to bear. Only when the system itself is worse than unbearable can risk-averse systems consider going off script.

This was the sin plaguing the maiden's life. Her lady was supposed to crumble under the embarrassment and wave a white flag.

“How would you make me happy?” her lady would ask in mock-innocence, prompting the maiden to whip out an expensive bottle of wine. Her lady would reject any other gift, her pride and guilt too great to bear such things. She once quietly accepted a plushie of a character she secretly loved, just to quietly sneak it back into the maiden’s closet, and then play dumb when the maiden confronted her about it (their backstories grew elaborate). Wine offered the mutual “entertainment” needed for her to accept it, presuming they both silently agreed to pretend that they drank enough to forget their activities while under social lubrication.

But to ask for something like that so directly, so soberly, so intensely, so vulnerably, it was too overwhelming for the maiden, realizing that she now waded deep in uncharted waters.

“Do you want me to die?” she heard someone say. They were a bit louder now, maybe block down the road, but they were growing closer, each beat of her heart reverberating like footsteps.

“Thanks,” her lady said, cutting through the awkward silence.

The lady took a deep breath, contemplating whether to let things go or to keep going. There were only six words she had to so say for her maiden to whip out the wine bottle, pretending that they were just teasing each other like usual.

But she was too tired to keep up the charade, crossing the Rubicon.

“You know ... I think I like you. More than as a friend.”

The maiden did not answer.

“Do you understand?” her lady asked.

“Mm-hmm,” the maiden murmured, though she looked down at an interesting piece of floor.

“Do you feel the same?” her lady asked.

“You should have died a long time ago,” the maiden heard someone say. They were loud enough to be by the entrance of their concrete building. The maiden tried to ignore it, turning to face her lady, but no words were formed. She was silenced by the reflection she saw in her lady’s misty eyes.

“I can’t,” she admitted.

“You should find a real man,” the maiden said in her best attempt at impartiality. “A rich, strong, family man who will give you everything you could ever want.” These heteronormative words were too hollow for either of them to believe for a moment, but tears welled up in the maiden’s eyes anyways. Her lady noticed and held her hands.

“It’s okay,” her lady cooed.

“Their lives are better without you in it,” she heard someone say. Was it a neighbor? The maiden knew it was insane for her to believe that her neighbors perceived her in such a way. But it was so close, it had to be one of them. It always came from someone close.

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It’s obvious I wanted to liberate myself from the feelings and secrets crushing me. Suppressing the *nafs* did threaten my life. But it was more manageable than what I imagined all those years ago. The key was aspirational downsizing. Her life made me healthier, but also required aspirational upsizing. Shaving, skincare, and exercise required aspirations for a better life, which took up living space. There is only so much upsizing one can do without purchasing extra living space. Her furniture was eventually thrown out. After I purged all evidence of her existence from this world, the extra living space was readily taken up by the demands of employment. Then the corresponding build up of hatred and depression took up some more living space, which required more aspirational downsizing. I gave up on a home of my own since

the odds of outliving Him were low. Likewise for retirement. I gave up on romantic love since I did not want to add an orthodox wife to the list of people who must not know of any secrets. I also do not think I could find a marriage partner that He would approve of that would also be open to what aspirational upsizing entailed. I also realized that even if I did find that unicorn, I had too much baggage to be more than a parasite on their life, dragging them down with my wretched sins and insecurities. If they did exist, they would be better off without me.

My lowering energy levels on top of my increasing expectation of messing up social interactions led me to give up on friendship. Besides, I was a Muslim who suppressed the *nafs*. Who would want to be friends with that kind of person? Slowly but surely, more and more aspects of my life rotted away. Hopes for a career, hobbies, activism, passion, purpose. It all lost meaning as the space they occupied was hollowed out and replaced with the duty and drudgery of sleep, prayer, gratitude, hatred, suffering, and paranoia.

At the very least, this transformation assured me of my piety. How else would I know for certain that I did not confuse my own beliefs with those of God's, if not by the threat it posed to my survival? There were many times when He yelled and screamed and cried about how I was destroying my life, but He could not realize the costs religious integrity. If this sacrifice was what *The Prophet* ultimately demanded from true believers, so be it. If this sacrifice was what God demanded from true believers, so be it. If this is what His people ultimately demanded from a person suppressing their *nafs*, so be it.

Suppression does not coincide with a "work hard, play hard" philosophy, especially if love, connection, recreation, drugs, fashion, and art are subject to religious scrutiny (when you do not have any coping mechanisms, your coping mechanism becomes sleep, avoidance, and apathy). Maybe His people expected a "work hard, pray harder" philosophy to work for

someone? I am not that someone. Besides, there was not supposed to be anything left in my life beyond that Promise. If there was, I would be tempted into aspirational upsizing again. A temptation to throw out the depression, hatred, paranoia, and gratitude using up all my living space. A temptation begging me to seek out the life she hoped for. There must be no ambiguity. I must either suppress my *nafs* like a true Muslim, or I must abandon Islam altogether.

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“No, it’s not okay,” the maiden lamented. “I’m horrible. I make everyone unhappy. I ruin everything.” Her lady held her, their foreheads touching.

“Don’t say that. You never made me unhappy.”

“What if you end up hating me, regret having known me, or worse, ruin your own life for me? Just like everyone else who ever loved me. I’m cursed.”

“You should have never had a family,” she heard someone remind her, their voice just outside the door of their flat.

At this the maiden became inconsolable, which broke her lady’s heart, and they cried together.

“You’re not cursed,” her lady assured her. “You’re the most beautiful girl in the entire world.”

“I’m ugly,” the maiden responded. “I’m the worst of both worlds. A parasite.” Her lady cupped her face, wiping away the tears.

“Our kind does not even deserve to go to heaven,” she heard someone say, loud enough to be in the same room. But she did not know where they were since they came from everywhere.

“Please, don’t say such evil things. You’re strong. You’re beautiful. You’re worthy. It

tears me apart seeing you hurt yourself. I want nothing more than to make you the happiest wife in the entire world.”

The maiden was surprised by this declaration. Her beloved lady remained as red as a tomato, but gazed lovingly into her soul, even at the unseemly parts. The maiden then noticed her beloved’s tears, and wanted to wipe them away, to make her beloved the second happiest wife in the entire world.

“I love you,” the maiden said at last, freed from the burdens on her soul.

The maiden wanted to love her lady, to make her lady laugh, to care for her lady, and to be cared for by her lady. The maiden wanted to spend time with her lady, to buy her lady gifts, and watch her lady squirm since she was not used to being treated with so much attention. She wanted to give and receive hugs and kisses, and so much more, enough to conquer everything life throws against them.

“You never mattered,” she heard someone whisper in her ear.

“You never deserved to be happy. You are a worthless failure who came from a worthless people.”

It was overwhelming, compelling her to believe what it said like a form or racist mind control.

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My Faustian bargain cannot be a source of self-pity. I must recognize the greater context. I must be grateful no matter how high the costs of that Promise rose. In other countries, people like me are killed and brutalized. He was beaten with hangars, sandals, and rods as a child, and so too were His brothers and nephews. He never laid a finger upon me. Most of the time, His ideology aligned my wellbeing with wholesome familial affection. Only on rare occasions would

it align my wellbeing with control and coercion. I just had to endure the circumstances and hope those occasions were rare.

Tougher choices are made all the time by *chica trans* (trans girls) migrants from Honduras and Guatemala. Martha Balaguera met three of them when writing her 2018 article “Trans-migrations: Agency and Confinement at the Limits of Sovereignty.”<sup>17</sup> *Chica trans* migrants are often driven into migration and exploitative sex work by the economic conditions, transphobic families/cultures, and criminal elements back home.<sup>18</sup> They are driven to cross borders illegally by the slow and esoteric American immigration system.<sup>19</sup> They are funnelled towards criminals during migration by aggressively policed borders, resulting in exploitation, extortion, and brutality, which is often downplayed as merely the price of the journey.<sup>20</sup> The economic conditions in America drives them into sex work again, which increases the odds of getting arrested, which increases the odds of getting deported.<sup>21</sup> Despite these odds, many migrants like them bear their suffering in silence. How could I claim that my burdens are beyond my capacity<sup>22</sup> in the face of such perseverance? How else could I address my privilege in this country if not by bearing these burdens for His sake?<sup>23</sup> Him who sacrificed everything so that I may live in a country that others sacrifice life and limb to enter. Him who sacrificed everything so that I do not need to endure the cruel watchful eyes of the state.

Balaguera argued that all of these aspects of migration, in addition to the Mexican shelter system, constitutes a larger incarceration regime that controls migrants beyond detention centers and prisons.<sup>24</sup> Besides the obvious resemblance to prisons (high-perimeter fences, barbed wire, fixed eating times, mandatory curfews), shelters also have strict disciplinary rules against smoking, begging, and sex, alongside clothing and gender segregation rules (the rules primarily police feminine people because of the notion that femininity “naturally” provokes male disorder



but not vice versa). For *chica trans* migrants, this means that if they go to such shelters, their gender and sexuality will be policed, their economic autonomy will probably disappear, they will be exposed to transphobia via gender segregation, and they will be isolated. While they also are not forced to stay in shelters, the shelters are also instrumental for obtaining migration papers, which forces them to ask themselves how long they can endure this precarious situation until they convince themselves to leave.<sup>25</sup> Surely, I can tolerate my meagre situation.<sup>26</sup>

One of the *chica trans* migrants Balaguera met was named Rosario. Rosario left Guatemala to transition in the US due to a transphobic family. She ended up in a cycle of migration and deportation.<sup>27</sup> Balaguera met Rosario in a shelter in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. She did not complain about the gender segregation, deadnaming, or misgendering she faced. She also isolated herself to minimize danger. But a volunteer coordinator later told Balaguera that Rosario gave up on trying to obtain a humanitarian visa. She left the shelter alone on top of a train. The volunteer doubted whether Rosario was still alive since migrants previously died trying to escape from police operations aimed at keeping the trains clear.<sup>28</sup> Were the trains so much more preferable to conformity? Would she be disappointed in the choice I made? Should our lives have been switched? Ever since I read Balaguera's article, I kept asking that to myself, wondering what she would have done if she was born and raised in my place instead.

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The maiden ignored the voice condemning her. She tasted the salt of tears in her beloved's mouth. She kissed every inch of her beloved's face, the imprints left by her lipstick proving to her that their love was real.

"Worthless subhuman," she heard someone say. They were inside her head, like a talking cockroach floating in her cerebrospinal fluid, swimming across every hemisphere of her brain to

whisper doubts and condemnations. She tried her best to ignore it, to focus on the only person in her life that mattered.

She kissed her beloved's forehead, scalp, ears, and chin. Her beloved's neck, shoulders, arms, and fingers. Her beloved's stomach and ... elsewhere, and waves of catharsis would overtake them.

When they were finished, the maiden promised to cultivate a life worth living with her beloved, even if the roach in her head fought against her every step of the way. She had to live a life that she could be proud of, nothing could change that now. After making this promise, she would drift away while gazing at her lover's cheeks, which shone in the moonlight like silver.

Her eyes dimmed, each blink lasting longer than the last, until one blink lasted forever, her entire world flickering out like a candle. All that was left was an empty abyss where nothing existed. Neither light nor sound nor smell nor touch. Nothing, except a demon which knew nothing of love, only an unending hatred of all that exists.

The abyss was then replaced with a hellish reality. The faint scent of cigarette ash on a black leather coat. A blanket grazing against tangles of wiry, patchy hair. Dull aches and pains radiating across a misshapen body covered in small flies and crawling bed bugs. A skull throbbing with a migraine. Her promise was replaced with my own.

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I slithered out of bed to stare out at the night sky, just too early for the *Fajr* (dawn prayer). Truth and falsehood were blended in my head, so a part of me wondered if I was dreaming then or now. The wind whistled through the trees outside, mixing with the sound of the pre-dawn chirping of birds. One may notice them if one stayed up all night. The swaying branches looked like they were possessed by a tree spirit, and within all the howling and chirping

were the words of that spirit if one paid attention.

“Abomination,” that spirit reminded me.

We downsized to a one-bedroom apartment to reduce monthly operating costs, deal with existing debts, and adapt to the new normal. He slept on the couch while I was given the bedroom, and His sacrifice was not lost on me. This occurred when His wife died, and while that time was tough, I do not think it was nearly as impactful on me as it would be on most people. I became distant from her the moment I was no longer a baby. She needed hearing aids and was not good with English, and I spoke quietly and could not speak the language of their people, so we seldom interacted. She spent most of her time working, cleaning (I was obsessed with cleaning before I engaged in aspirational downsizing), making rice and curry, and talking to friends on the phone. If there was something she needed from me, I got it done. Otherwise, He was molding me in His image, showing up to parent-teacher interviews, praising me for my grades on tests, and conversing with me about my (filtered and falsified) beliefs and emotions. I tried not to think about her unpaid, thankless labour, nor how her job as a cook in a nursing home made her income greater than any of the jobs we had at any point in our lives. When she died, that sin was set in stone, but I was already corrupted by so many sins that it did not change my self-perception, at least that is what I think.

The white walls of this apartment had black stains around the corners and a small window with grime collecting on the edge. A bioweapon was probably infused into the green carpeting, but it was never removed. Five of His nephews laid on that carpet, a bedsheet protecting them. His brothers similarly slept in the living room; the couch transformed into prime real estate for the eldest of them. None of them complained, for they were all familiar with the relative poverty that they had overcome by now thanks to His nephews' diligence. I do not know

if any of them had to suppress any *nafs*.

The washroom was similarly of dubious hygiene. I did not notice when I thought I saw her glasses in the washroom mirror. But the I noticed the mold, mildew, and soap scum, remembering that I was wearing my own square glasses rimmed by grey metal, one of the screws replaced with a wire. I only took a glance at the sight in the mirror, but the thing imitating my movements was unsettling. I did not get a good look, but from what I saw, the centers of its eyes beheld soulless black coals, the kind most fitting on those of the *shayāṭīn* (demons). And yet it followed me to the letter in my periphery, even when I broke eye contact to focus on the roaches scuttling across the edges of the sink and walls like soldiers navigating a warzone. One of them was braver than the rest, scurrying across the counter until it headed into the sink. It was a bit bigger than the others, with a swollen abdomen that made it look especially disgusting. I turned on the tap and sprinkled some water to make it leave the sink. But it did not take the hint, sitting in place while its antennae wiggled around. So, I flushed it down the drain, and the rest of roaches continued scurrying like soldiers, as if their brave neighbor never existed at all.

I was expected to drop off my résumé at some stores, restaurants, and warehouses while His family visited Him. The idea was that they would support Him until I adapted to the new normal. I was diligent enough to convince the golf club that I could work with them in the winter. When they hosted corporate events, I tried to be a waiter, hoping that I would not confuse the men in suits with one another, and the rest of my time was spent on odds and ends until spring. But there was an issue.

They served alcohol. My previous duties avoided direct involvement, but as a waiter, I overtly collaborated upon sin and transgression. In one of His multi-hour-long lectures, He described His life when He first came to this country. He did the odds and ends in all kinds of

Italian and Korean restaurants as a dishwasher, busboy, waiter, cook, and then assistant manager before I was born. He ignored the alcohol for a long time, deciding that His duty to send remittances to His family back home as gratitude for raising Him overruled such personal sins. But when I was born, He resolved to make sure that not a single morsel of food in my mouth nor a single dime in my pocket was *ḥarām*. And so, He switched to less lucrative odds and ends that strained His body. Carpentry, plumbing (His civil engineering experience back in His home country gave Him sufficient expertise), many years driving a taxi, then working as a school crossing guard, and probably even more jobs that I could not recall. This change coincided with the rekindling of His religiosity to raise me as an authentic Muslim. I tried to see if the golf club would be flexible for me. They did not want to be, and they knew how to make my life difficult without violating any laws.<sup>29</sup> So, I got used to unsustainable jobs broken up by long stretches of unemployment, thankful that I did not have to pay Him rent. I was in one such period, expected to endure the hiring process once more in the hopes that the next job might last longer.

But I just could not do it. The migraine made me feel like I was already in my eighties. I was just too tired to be alive, even nominally. I just wanted to go back to sleep. So, I did. I crawled back into bed, hoping that the next time I awoke, the headache would subside. Besides, I knew it was all just a pipedream.

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Ch 2 Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gregor Craigie, *Our Crumbling Foundation Canadian Edition: How We Solve Canada's Housing Crisis* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2024), p. 141.
- <sup>2</sup> Craigie, *Canada's Housing Crisis*, p. 18.
- <sup>3</sup> Craigie, *Canada's Housing Crisis*, p. 38–39.
- <sup>4</sup> Craigie, *Canada's Housing Crisis*, p. 134–135.
- <sup>5</sup> Craigie, *Canada's Housing Crisis*, p. 135–136.
- <sup>6</sup> Craigie, *Canada's Housing Crisis*, p. 142.
- <sup>7</sup> This was inspired by an account from a schoolteacher named Emily in *Canada's Housing Crisis*, p. 143–144.
- <sup>8</sup> Yushu Zhu, Yue Yuan, Jiaxin Gu, and Qiang Fu, “Neoliberalization and Inequality: Disparities in Access to Affordable Housing in Urban Canada 1981–2016,” *Housing Studies* 38, no. 10 (2023): p. 1860–1861.
- <sup>9</sup> Zhu et al, “Neoliberalization and Inequality,” p. 1861.
- <sup>10</sup> Zhu et al, “Neoliberalization and Inequality,” p. 1861–1862.
- <sup>11</sup> Zhu et al, “Neoliberalization and Inequality,” p. 1862.
- <sup>12</sup> Zhu et al, “Neoliberalization and Inequality,” p. 1862.
- <sup>13</sup> Zhu et al, “Neoliberalization and Inequality,” p. 1863.
- <sup>14</sup> Private equity firms are companies that use money from rich investors to invest in private companies.
- <sup>15</sup> Mortgage-backed financial securities are esoteric financial assets that allow investors to buy ownership of mortgages from banks, receiving the income generated by the people paying off those mortgages while giving banks the cash needed to issue even more mortgages.
- <sup>16</sup> For a US-centered analysis of these specifics, See: this YouTube video and the sources it cites: Second Thought (@SecondThought), “Why Housing Keeps Getting More Expensive,” *YouTube*, Oct 4, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0z4KgUbIMc>; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Institutional Investors Outbid Individual Homebuyers,” *Evidence Matters* (Winter 2023), <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/winter23/highlight1.html>; “PESP Private Equity Manufactured Housing Tracker,” *Private Equity Stakeholder Project*, accessed October 12, 2024, <https://pestakeholder.org/pestp-private-equity-manufactured-housing-tracker/>; Dick Bryan, and Mike Rafferty, “Political Economy and Housing in the Twenty-First Century - From Mobile Homes to Liquid Housing?” *Housing, Theory, and Society* 31, no. 4 (2014): 404–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2014.947080>; Desiree Fields, and Sabina Uffer, “The financialisation of rental housing: A comparative analysis of New York City and Berlin,” *Urban Studies* 53, no. 7 (2016): 1486–1502, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014543704>; Cody Hochstenbach, and Manuel B Aalbers, “The Uncoupling of House Prices and Mortgage Debt: Towards Wealth-Driven Housing Market Dynamics,” *International Journal of Housing Policy* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2023): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2023.2170542>; Manuel Aalbers. *The Financialization of Housing: A Political Economy Approach*, 1st ed (Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315668666>.
- <sup>17</sup> Martha Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations: Agency and Confinement at the Limits of Sovereignty,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): p. 641–642.
- <sup>18</sup> Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations,” p. 641, 643–645, 656–658.
- <sup>19</sup> Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations,” p. 649, 654–655.; In case it wasn't already clear, “just apply legally” isn't a real option. How would you apply for a Visa if you were homeless? How long would you wait for a Visa if you were homeless? How many times would you reapply if you were homeless?
- <sup>20</sup> Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations,” p. 649, 651.
- <sup>21</sup> Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations,” p. 649–650.
- <sup>22</sup> Muḥammad Taqī-ud-Dīn Al-Hilālī and Muḥammad Muḥsin Khan, trans. *The Noble Qur'ān: English Translations of the meanings and commentary* (Madinah: King Fahd Glorious Qur'ān Printing Complex, 2015), 2:286.
- <sup>23</sup> Ignoring the familial guilt aspect, one could imagine more productive methods of addressing one's privilege than complex forms of emotional and spiritual self-flagellation.
- <sup>24</sup> Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations,” p. 643.
- <sup>25</sup> Balaguera, “Trans-Migrations,” p. 644–645, 652–655.
- <sup>26</sup> While these situations are different, they also share a common thread of circumstance forcing the subject to torture themselves. Perhaps this is more of a difference in degree than a difference in kind. In one situation, primarily economic, social, and immigratory factors force trans migrants to choose between many precarious situations. In the other situation, there is no immigratory factors, and the economic factors are less prominent, but certain social,

religious, and psychological factors are greater, which narrows the choices to the relatively precarious ones, though not nearly as intense as those faced by trans migrants.

<sup>27</sup> Balaguera, "Trans-Migrations," p. 649–650.

<sup>28</sup> Balaguera, "Trans-Migrations," p. 653–654.

<sup>29</sup> Note that even if an employer is violating a law, an employee's suppression of their *nafs* might erode their self-esteem and self-preservation enough to prevent them from raising any complaints, and perhaps convince employers that such an employee can be walked all over.

## Ch 2 Bibliography

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